

Evaluation of Gender for Agriculture and Rural Development in the Information Society (GenARDIS)—Phases I and II

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

GenARDIS, as a small grants fund, is making important inroads into the information and communication technology (ICT) for development field in the African, Caribbean and the Pacific (ACP) countries. It is consciously encouraging and engendering the adoption and application of ICT. This is the overall finding of an evaluation conducted over five months in 2006, with the aims of: (a) Identifying and assessing the achievements of the two phases of GenARDIS; (b) Assessing the changes (in capacities, resource-sharing, services provided, program delivery, etc.) perceived and experienced by the people-Awardees of GenARDIS during their involvement in the project; and (c) Identifying lessons learnt to feed into GenARDIS for its evolution toward its next phase of design and implementation. The evaluation overall had a total of 31 responses or a response rate of 66% (affected negatively by the poor response rate of Honourable Mentions). This is based on a total of 47 actual individuals, organisational representatives and/or project owners (without repeated count, for example, two-time grantee KAIPPG in Kenya is counted as one project owner rather than two). These individuals comprised all possible categories of respondents from both phases—grantees, Honourable Mentions, judges, organisational partners (sponsor agencies) and implementing partners (coordinating/administrative agencies).

EVALUATION RESULTS

Within two phases (2002–2004 and 2004–2006) of its implementation, GenARDIS can be said to have achieved reasonably high qualitative successes with four main characteristics—influential; stimulating; momentum generator; and needs-based, inclusive and open:

a) GenARDIS is influential

The number of submissions in the two phases were consistently over 300, reaching organisations that are well-networked and have access to information, as well as organisations that are situated in areas where poor ICT infrastructure exists. GenARDIS has also proven to be persuasive in different ways, effecting positive outcomes both directly and indirectly. For example, for a number of respondents, receiving the GenARDIS grant was an affirmation to their ability to address gender and ICT issues. Grantees described diverse ways in which GenARDIS funding enabled them to raise their profile, attract new funding, enlarge their focus, gain new skills and knowledge, present themselves at various fora, include new areas into their work, influence policy, and strengthen their gender approach. For organisational and implementing partners, this aspect was less obvious due to their already strong history in gender, gender and ICTs, or ICT for development work, but being part of GenARDIS does inform their own internal programming.



Women users at the Cyber Centre in Burkina Faso, set up by MANEGDBZANGA.

b) GenARDIS stimulates interest and action

The catalytic element of GenARDIS despite being a small grants fund lie in its very specific advocacy agenda, of addressing gender and promoting the use of ICTs, particularly among rural women, in the areas of agricultural and rural development in ACP countries. Most grantees and Honourable Mentions expressed that they did not have any previous experience with concrete projects on gender and ICTs before applying and being selected for a GenARDIS grant. The

stimulating effect of GenARDIS does not only affect the applicants and type of applications submitted, but also influence who else will partner and support the “mission” of GenARDIS, and this aspect could be further exploited for the future phases of GenARDIS.



Information and health supplies at the information kiosk in Musokoto, Kenya. The kiosk is managed and maintained by the community, who have very strong support from local authorities. Information provided here covered community needs—on health issues, on farming, on nutrition, on HIV/AIDS, on income-generating activities and starting up small businesses, etc.

c) GenARDIS generates momentum

For a number of grantees, GenARDIS helped create a momentum for the organisation and/or individual to address gender and promote ICTs further in the areas of agricultural and rural development. This included their hope to or being able to influence to some extent the general or local policy environment.

d) GenARDIS is needs-based, inclusive and open

Grantees confirmed that GenARDIS is a unique small grants fund. It is the follow-up workshop, i.e. the knowledge-sharing workshop, that made GenARDIS “a bit different”, and:

— . . . a small granting body like this is unique—with the least fuss but with a clear determination of both the need and where the money can be best spent. There should be more models like this where smaller grant funding is provided to organisations working at grassroots level—the vast proportion of funding these days is through multilateral agencies via government bodies, which more often than not, require not only a disproportionate amount of paperwork but also [have] potentials for corruption and misuse In other words, GenARDIS is a breath of fresh air and should be continued.”

— 2003 Grantee, the Caribbean

The nature of these achievements understandably too affected some changes within grantees and their organisations. The changes effected were clearly dependent on the extent of the grantees' own comprehension of gender issues, and there were differing levels of conceptual understanding among staff/project team members as well. These projects sponsored by GenARDIS had very specific contexts and poor ICT infrastructure environments to work within. The learnings and knowledge gained are very new for those who have never had access to information on gender and ICTs at the global level, and/or who have never undertaken a gender and ICT project.



—Donna who worked on the GenARDIS project and was also a beneficiary spoke. She was trained in using Participatory GIS in order to participate in the mapping of the Rooibos tealands for the GenARDIS project and to train other women in using the GPS tools. Donna did not understand GIS or GPS until she did the GPS practically and pushed the buttons. It became easy and interesting when she did it practically. She enjoyed it when she knew what to do. During the training on the 2nd day they were left alone and it was a very good thing as they had to grapple with the GPS. So when the GPS showed other things then they did not know what to do. That was challenging.”

— Jennifer Radloff, GenARDIS evaluator, excerpted from project site visit report on South Africa

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Prioritise the explicit objective of encouraging innovation vs. the non-articulated objective of balancing geographical and language representation

Encouraging and supporting innovation may well demand that GenARDIS does exactly that, irrespective of where the proposals are coming from, which language is being spoken and whether the proposer has any kind of previous gender and ICT experience in the areas of agricultural and rural development, especially if replicability and possibilities to pilot-test the same in other local/country contexts exists. One of the recognised challenges of the GenARDIS grantmaking process is in knowing the depth of the project implementors' understanding of gender and ICT issues, and extrapolating the extent to which women might benefit from the project. The (lack of) previous experience in implementing a gender and ICT project should not become a criterion that excludes potential projects from being considered. Rather, the grant should be used to generate new knowledge in places where it does not exist. This should be the priority in GenARDIS' geographical consideration. Thus, it should remain a grant that supports innovation and to build on existing knowledge at the local level about the gender dimensions and the application of ICTs in agriculture and rural development.

2) Address arising risk-taking issues

A small grant fund is essentially a risk-taking grant, where both the grantmaker and grantee are risk-takers. To further reduce the risks, GenARDIS will need to provide timely interventions (advice, feedback on proposals, reports) or opportunities for wider interaction for substantive knowledge-sharing and possible mentoring. These support/mentoring mechanisms must substantively address the varying difference and extent of gender sensitivity and capacity or

focus, among grantees. It is this capacity of grantees, or limitations thereof, in enabling women's agency and in operationalising gender-sensitive mechanisms and processes in coordination, communication, decision-making, conflict resolution, and monitoring and evaluation, that can influence the immediate impact of projects supported by GenARDIS. GenARDIS has to balance its natural inclination to "allow projects to shape themselves" and to ensure local ownership over projects vis-à-vis ensuring a more conscious and consistent integration, analysis and addressal of gender inequality within these supported projects.

3) Address sustainability issues

Project sustainability issues were raised quite often by grantees, especially those who worked directly with communities. GenARDIS partners may therefore want to consider: (a) providing follow-up grants to select grantees who have managed to mobilise communities at the grassroots level and bring about some observable change in behaviour and attitude, and in addressing gender-power dynamics or stigma and discrimination of marginalised groups in the rural areas; (b) concretely helping successful grantees in linking up with others for additional support, financial or technical assistance (e.g. in the area of microcredit, technological know-how in ICTs, etc.); (c) providing a more comprehensive package of funds, technical support and community-building as a more integrated grantmaking fund, i.e. merging ideas from both (a) and (b) above; and (d) linking up GenARDIS grantees, especially those who do outreach work and work directly with communities, with the resource mobilisation capacity-building program of the IDRC. In addition, GenARDIS could choose to support project proposals that introduce gender and ICTs in a way that enhances existing work on the ground. However, GenARDIS must not encourage project proposers to just "add on gender", and to ensure that this does not happen, applying GEM to such projects on the ground, if selected, and before the grants are expended, would be ideal.

4) Conduct a more critical review of research-type project proposals

GenARDIS should only fund research which is participatory and transformative in some way, and not just for the implementers (usually academics and/or their students), but where there will be some gender perspective or gender analytical type of feedback to people who have participated in the research. Research-type projects supported should ideally incorporate policy interventions, even if this happens only at the local level.

5) Identify and commit future support to "rising stars"

As a small grants fund established to support innovation, GenARDIS "has an obligation" to identify "rising stars" for future support—projects with potential or already proven multiplier effect, projects that have proven to be replicable, projects which have clearly addressed gender relations in the application of ICTs, projects which have been innovative in providing ICT-based solutions, etc.

6) Establish an advisory

The set up of an advisory of some kind who have proven knowledge on the ground on gender and ICTs (and who need not be from the ACP countries) could be a mechanism that is sufficiently effective for risk reduction. The advisory need not comprise of many members and could be gender and development "experts" who believe in what GenARDIS is trying to do and who could assist grantees to strengthen the gender aspects of their projects. The difference in setting up such a mechanism for risk reduction is in the "when". While GenARDIS seeks to support innovation, GenARDIS must also recognise that a lot of these project proposers work under very difficult conditions (poor infrastructure, high costs of ICTs, etc.) and sometimes, are entering into gender and ICT-type projects for the first time ever (a credit to the catalytic element of GenARDIS). Hence, capacity-building or mentoring of some kind will be needed. This is a process that can be implemented in the post-selection phase where such experts provide support to the project in further fine-tuning their design and implementation strategy.

7) Ensure real meaning to “sharing of information” and knowledge-sharing

One way of ensuring that sharing of information and knowledge-sharing is more meaningful to Honourable Mentions, as well as grantees, is to include all shortlisted applicants/project proposers to a GEM-orientation and skills-building workshop (a “kick-off” workshop) before the grants are actually given. If at the time of this workshop, the shortlisted applicants/project proposers already know that they are Honourable Mentions, such a workshop would help them fine-tune their proposals in a more timely manner, when interest, motivation and “momentum to act” is still strong within themselves. It would also help them feel re-energised by the enthusiasm and sharing of grantees (who would by now also feel less threatened and less competitive), and they would be further motivated to improve on their project design and submit new proposals on these to other possible funders. While some do see the end-of-programme term workshop as useful, and a benefit to Honourable Mentions as well, these views are largely the views of grantees and partners. Honourable Mentions had differing views and little understanding of what the term “Honourable Mention” really meant.

The set up of ICT-based channels (mailing list, blog) for sharing of information and knowledge also assumed that there is ease of access and a certain level of comfort in using the technology. It also assumes that grantees and Honourable Mentions have a strong inclination in using the technology regularly. The mailing list, however, was seen as more relevant to grantees rather than to Honourable Mentions. Honourable Mentions evaluated their ability to participate in knowledge-sharing and information dissemination as very limited and frustrating because most of the communication suited the funded projects. There is also always the issue of how much time people have to share online. If there were a “kick-off” workshop, the mailing list could be introduced there and people would already know each other and so would tend to share information online more easily. The knowledge-sharing and information dissemination mechanisms put in place by GenARDIS seemed more meaningful as an experience for future rather than current/existing projects sponsored by GenARDIS.

8) Extend community-building beyond GenARDIS

GenARDIS should see itself as strengthening a community of activists and practitioners in addressing gender and promoting ICTs in the agricultural and rural sectors. This could require integrating or introducing grantees to a wider network of practitioners and activists. Another possibility would be to support linkages for project proposers who have already started their own networking and have generated interest in their projects for replication in some form or another. Such a community would then have a shared purpose for getting together and exchanging information compared to a learning network that is more generic.

In addition to the key recommendations above, three more recommendations focused on changes to management, coordination and grant administrative arrangements, as well as publicity and communication issues. Two more recommendations are dependent on availability of additional resources. These are to consider extending a project's grant term; and to consider expanding the grant size by drawing in other sponsor agencies and mobilising additional resources, or by providing grants to only quality proposals and thereby, possibly reducing the number of grants given.

CONCLUSION

It is important that GenARDIS continues as it is already creating very positive changes on the ground. For its future phases of implementation, it would be necessary to develop a communication strategy or at minimum, information dissemination and knowledge-sharing channels and mechanisms based on users' needs, not just for grantees and Honourable Mentions, but also for all the partners and judges concerned. The second, but possibly, most critical and minimum change that GenARDIS could afford to effect is to ensure the holding of the orientation and capacity-building "kick-off" workshop. The scope of content for this workshop could include:

- Orienting participants to the Gender Evaluation Methodology (GEM)
- Skills development, specific to the needs of shortlisted applicants and for which, some applicants could deliver on (so GenARDIS would need to find out about strengths as well)
- Feedback on project methodologies
- Close examination of best practice case studies, particularly on project design, established mechanisms and processes for monitoring and evaluation, as well as to encourage active community participation and women's agency, identification and development of quantitative and qualitative indicators, etc.
- Critical questioning by GenARDIS partners, judges and other invited gender and ICT experts, if any, to deepen the empowerment process and potential of the projects. For example, it might be useful to ask shortlisted applicants to specifically think about how beneficiaries would be involved in decision-making about the project.

A small grants fund was never designed to sustain projects but to stimulate action to effect change despite the limited resources. This is what GenARDIS manages to do, despite being such a young small grants fund. However, the cutting-edge of GenARDIS—what will make it stand out and more unique—would lie in its ability to push its limits to identify and continue supporting the more innovative and effective of its sponsored-projects.